



# HEARTS IN EXILE

A New Historical Reading of Elias Khoury's *Gate of the Sun*

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## A New Historical Reading of Gate of the Sun



Palestine

A Portrait by Shafek Radwan

In memory of the many precious lives that were lost

In memory of the past, in whose shadows we are still entrapped

In memory of our long-lasting and continuing silence

*Gate of the Sun* is a tale of a hurt that never heals. It is a political novel that delves and submerges into the core of a waning humanity; hiding itself in dark and shadowy depths. In this novel, we learn to appreciate the *joie de vivre* of a dying nation; the resistance of an ostracized people; the struggle to breathe in life. As heartrending as it is, the novel leaves its readers aggrieved, paralyzed and inconsolable. Karl Marx stated that history repeats itself twice: the first time as a tragedy, the second time as farce. In the present day, these words ring true as we stand now as passive spectators of a farcical play that has travesty of justice and mockery of peace as its foremost themes. To write this epic tale of love and loss, Khoury spent a considerable time in Palestinian camps, living the agony and listening to the one story that has not yet been properly told; the Palestinian tale. Khoury, himself, confesses that "this novel could not have seen the light without the hands of the tens of women and men in the refugee camps of Burge El Barajneh, Shatilla, Mar Elias and Ein El Helweh." He adds: "they opened widely the doors of their memories and their dreams to me."

Published in Arabic on the 50th anniversary of the of the 1948 war—known to Israelis as the War of Independence and to Palestinians as Al Nakbah, "the catastrophe"—the novel records the experiences of Palestinian refugees. In a reminiscent gesture to the

lyrical flashback style of *1001 Arabian Nights*, the stories of Palestine are narrated. However, as Scheherazade tells stories to save herself, Dr. Khaleel narrates in order to rescue his dying friend as well as to set himself free from the prison of oblivion. At a makeshift hospital in the makeshift Shatila refugee camp on the outskirts of Beirut, Dr. Khaleel sits by the bed of his gravely ill, unconscious friend and surrogate father, Yunis who is a Palestinian fighter and hero. Growing up under the British Mandate, Yunis roams the hills with other young men from his Galilee village, learning to fight against those who have violated his sacred land. Separated from his young wife during the 1948 war, Yunis retreats with other displaced Palestinians to Lebanon, where he becomes a leader in what would later become the PLO. He smuggles weapons into Palestinian lands and eventually commands military training camps in southern Lebanon. Naheeleh creates a clandestine home for him in the caves near their Galilee village. It is in this cave, which Yunis calls *Bab al Shams* – that Yunis and Naheeleh bask in the warmth of love. The collage of stories that emerges, ranging from the war of 1948 to the present, does not have a clear beginning or end. The novel deals with the consequences stemming from the establishment of the Jewish state. It is a chronicle of love and death, wars and shattered communities, fragmented families and ambiguous identities. The novel aptly ends with no end for the Palestinian nation is still searching for a place under the sun.

As a key member of the Palestine Research Center in Beirut, Khoury was deeply involved in the project of getting to know and understand the Jewish question. This effort was not some dreamy urge for coexistence, but an act of intellectual resistance to the denial that had overtaken official Arab political discourse following the defeat of 1967. The work, then, was not about "getting to know the enemy," but about facing oneself. In *Gate to the Sun*, it seems as if Khoury wants to lead both Palestinians and Israelis along different paths of confrontation with memory and ideology.

Throughout this new historical reading of the novel, I hope to evoke the spirit of Palestine in the last 50 years and present a detailed image of the culture that has experienced ultimate measures of annihilation



and aggression and, yet, remained intact.



Mourid Barghouti:" When Palestine is no longer a chain worn with an evening dress, an ornament or a memory ... when we walk on Palestinian dust, and wipe it off our shirt collars and off our shoes, hurrying to conduct our daily affairs - our passing, normal, boring affairs - when we grumble about the heat in Palestine and the dullness of staying there too long, then we will really have come close to it."



A t that time, says the story, the world was pregnant with war, and when there is a war, things take on a different shape. The air was different, the smells were different, and the people were different, as if war was a ghost that wore clothes like people and walked among them. Ein El Zeitoun, in those days, was a small village that slept on the pillow of war. Everything in it rippled. The people collided with the electrified air and tasted the taste of war. Nobody called anything by its proper name, for in those days war was not like its name. Everyone thought it would be like the war tales of their ancestors, in which mighty armies were defeated, locusts devoured the fields, and there were famine and pestilence in the land. They did not know it was the war that had no name. (73)

Gate of the Sun

" We have to collect the keys of our houses in Jerusalem. We are to collect our keys when the doors are already broken." Gate of the Sun



The gate of gates,  
No key in our hand. But we entered,  
Refugees to our birth from the strange death  
And refugees to our homes that were our homes and we came.  
In our joys that were scratches  
unseen by tears until they are about to flow.

**Mourid Braghouti**

## Elias Khoury

Born in 1948, Elias Khoury`s days on earth began together with the tragedy of the Arab world. A Lebanese novelist, playwright and critic, Khoury remains one of the most prominent and reputed intellectual figures of our time. He is the editor-in-chief of the cultural supplement of Beirut`s daily *An-Nahar*, and is a Global Distinguished professor of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies at New York University.

Khoury was born into a middle-class family in the predominantly Christian Ashrafiyye district of Beirut. In 1967, as Lebanese intellectual life was increasingly becoming polarized, with the opposition taking on a radical Arab nationalist and pro-Palestinian hue, Khoury travelled to Jordan where he visited a Palestinian refugee camp and then enlisted in Fatah, the largest resistance organization in the Palestinian Liberation Organization. He left Jordan in 1970 after the Palestinian guerrilla forces in the kingdom were crushed in Black September and travelled to Paris to continue his studies. After returning to Lebanon, he became a researcher with the Organization's research centre in Beirut. He took part in the Lebanese civil war that broke out in 1975, and was seriously injured, temporarily losing his eyesight. In 1998, Khoury was awarded the Palestine Prize for *Gate of the Sun*, and in 2000, the novel was named Le Monde Diplomatique`s Book of the Year.



# New Historicism

"I began with the desire to speak with the dead"

Stephen Greenblatt

*Shakespearean Negotiations*

Literature is a miniature of life; it is a representation of that which cannot be simply embodied. In a similar vein, history attempts to recount the story of life and, sometimes, the story is sadly reduced to a series of oversimplified concepts and ideologies. A poetic work, and a novel, in particular, "is a powerful condenser of...of unarticulated social evaluations- each word is saturated with them." (Bakhtin: 107) In this sense, new historicism is a ground-breaking venture that aims at developing the art of literary appreciation by rendering it more inclusive and all-encompassing. I believe that, in order to analyze a text, the reader should draw on different critical theories and ideas so as to procure a comprehensive assessment. Most critical theories are set apart from one another in terms of their purpose; however, they cannot but overlap as Lois Tyson comments in the following passage.

Critical theories can overlap with one another in a number of ways. Marxists can draw on psychoanalytic concepts to help them analyze the debilitating psychological effects of capitalism. Feminists can draw on Marxist concepts to examine the socioeconomic oppression of women ...Sometimes critical theories overlap so much, however, that it is difficult to determine the ways in which they are different, especially when practitioners disagree about what those differences are. (Tyson: 277)

New Historicism is a critical theory that influenced the academic circles since the early 1980s when Stephen Greenblatt introduced the term. Regarded by many as the father of new historicism, Greenblatt introduced a set of critical practices to which he often referred to as "cultural poetics". In fact, he was "a key figure in the shift from literary to cultural poetics and from textual to contextual interpretation in U.S. English departments in the 1980s and 1990s". (Leitch: 250) The new-fangled school rejected the New Critical precept that texts are autonomous units that should be examined with no reference to biographical information. The New Historicists, by contrast, argue that texts are always intimately connected to their historical and social context, especially when they attempt to repress that context. In other words, the New Historicists deliberately lure themselves to the "intentional fallacy" and the "historical fallacy" that were earlier rejected by the New Critics.

For the major philosophers of historicism- Vico, Schleiermacher and Dilthey- the past did not consist of a set of objective facts which could be discovered , related to other facts and used together to tell the story of what had taken place in the past. Historicists understand the past as a narrative, and accordingly they narrates the past. (Diachesis: 32) New historicism, on the other hand is more specifically concerned with questions of power and culture. It recognizes that history cannot be narrated in one version and, thus, it aims at recovering lost histories and exploring mechanisms of repression and subjugation. History is no longer a series of events that seem to have a linear or a casual relationship. Most importantly, new historicists believe in the impossibility of objective analysis "history is " more like an improvised dance consisting of an infinite variety of steps, following any new route at any given moment, and having no particular goal or destination ... Similarly ,while events certainly have causes , new historicists argue that those causes are usually multiple, complex , and difficult to analyze. One cannot make simple causal statements with any certainty. In addition, causality is not a one-way street from cause to effect." (Davis and Schleifer: 280)

Michel Foucault greatly influenced the intellectual scholars and the new historicists in particular, Foucault expounded upon the issues of power, subjectivity, and ideology. His willingness to analyze and discuss disparate disciplines has inspired a host of subsequent critics to explore interdisciplinary connections between areas that had rarely been examined together. An important feature of new historicism is generally known as "thick description". Clifford Geertz has expounded upon this term as he claimed that one must, in short, descend into detail, past the misleading tags, past the metaphysical types, past the empty similarities to grasp firmly the essential character of not only the various cultures but the various sorts of individuals within each culture, if we wish to encounter humanity face to face. In this area, the road to the general...lies through a concern with the particular... That is to say, the road lies, like any genuine Quest, through a terrifying complexity." (Geertz: 53)

Consequently, all texts should be examined, no matter how apparently trivial or unimportant they may seem. Social customs and habits are even regarded as texts. Such literary traces, as they are often called, give evidence of the processes through which our attitudes -- toward women, toward colonialism, toward love are made up. Accordingly, the sole aim of new historicists is to recapture the zeitgeist of bygone days seeing that they have long discovered that there is no objective history and that all historical interpretations are but subjective and conditioned viewpoints.

New Historicism perceives history as a master text that retains the repressed unconscious of literature. In fact, it offers its readers challenging ways with which they could read literature in history, and history in literature. By the same token, history and literature illuminate one another and contribute to the demanding mission of fathoming the unfathomable human societies. When R. G. Collingwood wrote of the similarities between literature and history in his book, *The Idea of History*, the only difference he could find between them was that history was intended to be true. (Collingwood: 246) Montrose expounded on the intricate relationship that binds literary texts and historical events in what he called the historicity of texts and the textuality of history.

By *the historicity of texts*, I mean to suggest the cultural specificity, the social embedment, of all modes of writing- not only the texts that critics study but also the texts in which we study them. By *the textuality of history*, I mean to suggest, firstly, that we can have no access to a full and authentic past, a lived and material existence, unmediated by the surviving textual traces of the society in question- traces whose survival we cannot assume to be contingent but must rather presume to be at least partially consequent upon complex and subtle social processes of preservation and effacement.(Montrose in Veenser: 20)

As the novelist L.P. Hartley notes at the beginning of *The Go-Between*, 'the past is a foreign country'. (Hartley: 7) True, the past is an exotic country that urges its visitors to discover its wonders. The zeitgeist of bygone days will help one in uncovering that of the present for, those who do not learn from history, are condemned to repeat it.



# A Culture of Pain

Umm Hassan is dead.

I saw everyone racing through the alleys of the camp  
and heard the sound of weeping. Everyone was  
coming out of their houses, bent over to catch their  
tears,                      running.                      (Khoury:                      3)

So does the novel, *Gate of the Sun*, apocalyptically begin. The last three sentences captured the waning spirit of a defeat that lasted more than fifty long years. This claustrophobic commencement aptly transfers the detached readers to the Palestinian mode of existence; that is, death. The act of "running" became a Palestinian habit that is no less customary than eating, sleeping and even breathing. The Palestinian odyssey has been triggered. Later on, Khaleel recounts how everyone was running as they "walked on that last journey, as the people of Galilee referred to their collective exodus to Lebanon. But it was not their last journey. In fact, it was the start of wanderings in the wilderness whose end only God knows." (21) Throughout this breathtaking novel, the reader runs along from one fallen village to the other as its people are driven and killed.

The Palestinian Diaspora has created a kind of existence that is characteristically vagrant and rootless. As Yunis summarizes his way of life, he rightly claims: "I am the only man in the world who lives out of his bag: I put all my possessions in my bag, and it goes wherever I go." (53) On another occasion, when the fedayeen were leaving Beirut during the siege, Khaleel said: "I imagined myself part of a Greek epic setting out on a new Palestinian Odyssey" for the "Greek boats would carry the Palestinians to their new wilderness". Khaleel's forecast was fulfilled. The state of wandering remains unending and, by each passing day, it earns more anguish. I would, here, like to refer to another related feature that resulted from the Diaspora; that is, emotional and psychological confusion. In postcolonial terms, this state of confusion would be referred to as an identity crisis or as a state

of hybrid. In fact, the process of naming, in the particular case, would only do injustice to the depth of the Palestinian experience. This state of confusion is best portrayed at moments of return when the exiled son returns to his motherland and tries to adjust the mental picture- he has lavishly drawn in his imagination- with a not so pleasant reality. The novel provides us with one example the feelings that overwhelm the exiled wanderer once he finds himself in his long-lost homeland.

Dr No`aman Ntaour " thought he would have a heart attack the moment he left the airplane but was surprised to find himself behaving like an ordinary traveller, as though this was not his own country. He took a taxi to Acre... where he walked and walked and walked, lost and alone in his own city. He said he wanted to find his house without help. He was like me- born outside Palestine and with no memories of his country except what his mother had told him.

In this chapter, I am interested in exposing some idiosyncratic habits, crucial to the understanding of the Palestinian culture. Expression of pain and its suppression are two important aspects of the Palestinian character. In other cultures, tears may be looked upon as signs of unmanly weakness. However, in this very rich and inimitable culture, tears are celebrated as a healing fountain. One Sufi Sheikh in the novel is known to have said that "we go back to the water to weep. We are born of the water, and we go to the water. And when the water dries up, we die," he would say, and he would repeat that "the sea is the bed of the Earth, and tears are the bed of man." (123) Likewise, Khaleel claims that it has become a habit " to look out for occasions to weep, for tears are backed up behind our eyes." (7) His mother rightly claims that "tears are our medicine."

However, in the face of repeated catastrophes, the Palestinian character has adapted itself to the bitter taste of loss. "When we suppress pain, it shows we know its meaning. Nothing equals pain but the suppression of it." (240) The paradox of expressing and suppressing pain seems not so very perplexing when reading the following passage.

The woman wept because she needed to weep. Naheel needed a false death in order to weep because a real death does not make us weep, it demolishes us. Have you forgotten how the death of her son Ibrahim annihilated her? Have you forgotten how she was incapable of weeping and overwhelmed by moaning? You were merely the pretext for all that weeping, which brought up from her depths the water imprisoned there for a thousand years. (125)

I have once heard an insightful remark about death that describes how, through the death of loved ones, we also die. Every respective death is tied in with that of some part in us. It is a famishing process. As Khaleel describes it, death "demolishes us". He, actually, walks in the same vicious circle of suppression when he describes how, after the death of his grandmother, he had to wait a month in order to feel the sorrow. "On the day itself, [he] did not feel any sorrow – it was as though [he] had been hypnotized. (282) Palestinians inhabit an emotional arid land where their eyes are "swollen with repressed tears." (54) This seems to be a characteristic of Palestinian agony, the inability to shed more tears since there were so many tears already spent.

Another Palestinian characteristic would manifest itself in the notion of time. As the celebrated poet Mourid El Barghouti poignantly remarks: "I do not live in a place. I live in a time, in the components of my psyche, in a sensitivity special to me." (91) Also, the novel displays this feature in the person of Umm Hassan who saw her long-lost house "as though no time had passed." Actually, the novel, in

itself, is oblivious to chronology and timing. Though it sets off on a Monday morning, the 20<sup>th</sup> of October 1995 but this moment in time is nothing but a returning point from which, and to which, the action moves back and forth. The story wavers between the present and the past, spanning more than 50 years of agony and rendering its readers, together with its characters, lost and confused. In fact, Edward Said once referred to Ghassan Kanafani's novel *Men in the Sun* "whose texture exemplifies the uncertainty whether one is talking about the past or the present... Throughout the novel there is a powerful sense of endless temporal motion, in which past, present, and future intertwine without any fixed centre." (Said: 119) These words are perfectly applicable to *Gate of the Sun* and, naturally, they would apply to a great number of Palestinian literary works because such works stem from one Palestinian consciousness.

Essentially, it is a consciousness that perceives time as being temporary and fleeting. The notion of temporariness is consequential to understanding the psyche of the Palestinian people; in fact, it is a product of their defence mechanism. Khaleel states: "everything's temporary," you told me when we met after the disaster in 1982. And during the long siege at Shatila in 1985 you said it was temporary. "Listen, we have no choice. However bad things are, we have to keep on living or we will become extinct." 131 "Do not count the years. We need to forget." (Khoury: 131) Another variation on the same theme occurs when he says: "time's wheel has turned, and now here I am, a temporary doctor, in a temporary hospital, in a temporary country. Everything is waiting for something. (150) The new historicist concern with 'discourse' would lead one to connect how all Palestinians, no matter how distant they are from the homeland, repeat the same words and concepts. I was extremely surprised, and intellectually amused, to find that the spirit of literature, as well as its language, recur in Palestinian real-life experiences.

In the disaster of 1948 the refugees found shelter in neighbouring countries as a 'temporary' measure. They left their food cooking on stoves, thinking to



return in a few hours. They scattered in tents and camps of zinc and tin 'temporarily'. The commandos took arms and fought from Amman 'temporarily', then from Beirut 'temporarily', then they moved to Tunis and Damascus 'temporarily'. We drew up interim programs for liberation 'temporarily' and they told us they had accepted the Oslo agreements 'temporarily', and so on, and so on.( Barghouti: 26)

Another Palestinian trait becomes apparent in everyday discourse. " It is in the interests of an occupation ...that the homeland should be transformed in the memory of its people into a bouquet of 'symbols'. Merely symbols." (Barghouti: 100). The occupation has succeeded in reducing the land to a number of symbols and this, in new historical terms, means that hegemonic power lies in their hands.

Khaleel`s grandmother used to stuff her pillow with flowers, saying that when she rested her head on it she felt as though she had returned to the village. She was apparently was afflicted with floral dementia -a widespread condition among Palestinian peasants who were driven from their villages. Flowers, oranges and olives are but a few examples of such symbols. However, the olives are the most prominent of all. "For the Palestinian, olive oil is the gift of the traveller, the comfort of the bride, the reward of autumn, the boast of the storeroom, the wealth of the family across centuries."(Barghouti: 58) Furthermore, olives came to represent Palestine and autonomy as the next passages suggest.

When the Israelis entered El Bruwweh, they blew it up house by house... they were like madmen .They blew up the houses and set about bulldozing them, and they trampled the wheat and felled the olives with dynamite. I do not know why they hate olives...they planted cypress trees in the middle of the olive groves and... the olive trees were ruined and died under the onslaught of the cypresses, which

swallowed them up... They cut down the olive tress and plant palms. Why do they love palms so much? (Khoury: 184)

El Kabri no longer existed - the cemetery had been erased, the oak tree cut down, the olive groves uprooted, and palms and pines planted in their place.... They had planted pines to hide the features of the place. (174)

Telephones and video have also become symbols of the homeland. As Khaleel puts it: " we have become a video nation...The cassettes circulate among the houses and people sit around their television sets and remember and tell stories. They tell stories about what they see and out of the pictures of the villages they build villages." (95). Barghouti, on the other hand, comments in his memoirs on the importance of the telephone. He says: " the details of the lives of all whom we love, the fluctuations of their fortunes in this world, all began with the ringing of the phone. A ring for joy, a ring for sorrow, a ring or yearning. Quarrels, reproach, blame, and apology between Palestinians are introduced by the ringing of the phone. We have never loved a sound so much, and we have never been so terrified by one... The displaced person can never be protected from the terrorism of the telephone. (Barghouti: 127)

Also, one very important aspect of the Palestinian character lies in the "idea of repetition and excess as a way of existing." (Said: 115) Khaleel would often ask the sleeping Yunis " I told you the story, remember? However, he awaits no answer to his repeated question because it is his memory which needs to be refreshed .The story needs to be told and retold so that it would surface to the level of reality. One early example of repetition occurs in the very beginning of the novel when the narrator tells his readers that Umm Hassan has died and he mentions it more than three times. The following lines constitute a perfect example of how Palestinians tend to repeat themselves. Khaleel repetitively comments: " they chose sixty men of different ages, tied their hands with rope and stood them in a row. Sixty men of different ages standing like a wall threaded together by a rope that

linked their hands, which were tied behind their backs." These repetitions are not mere variations on the same theme but they are examples of a Palestinian trait.

# Palestinian Whispers

When one story goes around and ends up as something different than that from which it began, one then labels the increased number of changes that occurred in the process of narration by the name "Chinese whispers". Stories do change but, every now and then, we are confronted with the never-ending tales of human sorrow and agony. These are the stories that gyrate in the vicious circle of life; the stories of a people in exile. The Palestinian story defies the reader's comprehension because it lies beyond the boundaries of normal existence. To fully comprehend its pathos, one has to live the everyday ordeal of being a Palestinian.

As Edward Said frequently observed, part of being Palestinian is being denied the right to narrate one's own experience. To be a Palestinian is to become shrouded in ultimate silence and, in fact, this may happen to explain why there are so few literary works deal with the tragic history of the *Nakba*. Palestine has produced some distinguished novelists, notably Emile Habiby and Ghassan Kanafani, both of whom explored the Palestinian condition of statelessness, exile and dispersion. Yet neither Habiby, with his absurdist vision of the experience of Palestinians who stayed behind in Israel (*The Secret Life of Saeed: The Pessoptimist*), nor Kanafani, with his bitter tales of Palestinian laborers in the Gulf (*Men in the Sun*), wrote directly about the *Nakba*, preferring to examine its reverberations instead. Indeed, there are so few novels about the *Nakba* that many Palestinians were grateful to Khoury simply for giving voice to their memories of the most traumatic and defining moment in their history. In fact, Khoury himself told *Le Monde* that he "was struck by the lack of historical documents reporting the Palestinian exodus (the "Naqba"). Scholarly research has been done by the Israelis. It is always the victor who writes history. The overlooked stories are left for the vanquished to tell, but in these miniscule stories lies the true suffering. "

Unfortunately, the number of Israeli books about the early settlements and the 1948 war--histories, memoirs, novels--exceeds by far the number of those written by Palestinians. As Raja Shehadeh



writes in *The Nation*, "in the face of a work like Joan Peters's *From Time Immemorial*, which drew upon spurious demographic "data" to deny that Palestinians were ever the majority in their own land, a Palestinian is angered but not moved to action. Indeed, the rebuttal to Peters came not from a Palestinian but from Norman Finkelstein, an American Jew. However, some historical work on the *Nakba*, written originally in English, was done by Palestinians such as Walid Khalidi and Ibrahim Abu-Lughod. Such works may justify why the Israeli "new historians" found it easier to persuade readers in the West that the 1948 refugees had not simply left of their own accord.

It is interesting to note that in the following excerpt, quoted from an interview to *Banipal* magazine, Elias Khoury referred to the importance of narration

Now I realize that the stories of my childhood were a popular version of *The Thousand and One Nights*... I think that these stories later played an important role in my novels, especially in my efforts to cross the frontiers between reality and the imaginary and to read life as a journey in unknown places... The writer for me is someone like a storyteller, a *hakawati*, or a narrator in the *maqamat* or in *The Thousand and One Nights*. The writer is only a medium. He is a medium between the direct experience of life and the imaginary, between memory and the future, between the written and spoken language, between the possibilities of language itself. In the deepest sense the writer is a rewriter. There is no writing.

By a similar token, the characters in the novel "cross the frontiers between reality and the imaginary" since both realms often intersect with one another. Khaleel cries out that he "cannot bear more illusions". He "wants something other than these stories filled with heroic deeds. [He] cannot live within the walls of a story for ever."(Khoury: 132). Khaleel, who represents a whole generation of Palestinian refugees who never saw their homeland, sometimes refers to Palestine as an imaginary country. On another occasion, he claims:"

the civil war had become a long dream, as though it had never happened. I can feel it under my skin but I do not believe it. All that remains are the pictures. Even our massacre here in the camp and the flies that hunted me down I see as though they were pictures. (254)

Ross Chambers argues in *Story and Situation*, "storytelling not only derives significance from situation but also has the power to change human situations. Storytelling has the power to rearrange and reinvent our conceptions of living. It may be that in the course of telling stories we will produce the values and norms of our society, and thereby perpetuate the existing system of representations."(Chambers: 7)

Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, the Palestinians were still unable to take in the consequences of their compulsory exodus. The stories of the novel stand on the thin line that separates the fictional, imaginary world from the brutally real one. For instance, Khaleel attempts to rearrange and reinvent some long-established events as he tells himself the following words:" I swear there was no war. I swear it was like a dream. Do not believe that the Jews won the 1948 war. In `48, we did not fight, we did not know what we were doing. They won because we did not fight, and they did not fight either, they just won. It was like a dream."(Khoury: 65)

The *Gate of the Sun* is primarily a story about a story. Upon engaging oneself in the reading of this novel, one will be entangled in a number of unfinished, intersecting and repeated tales only to discover at the end that no one but death can write the last words of the story. "Back to the beginning" is a recurring phrase in the novel and, almost certainly, it summarizes the movement of the narration. The story goes back and forth in time for although the novel begins in 1995, rarely does the narrator return to the present time wherein he is captured. Khaleel always goes "back to the beginning"; to the time when the tragedy began, to 1948.

The anecdote ... appears as the touch of the real."(Greenblatt: 40). New historicists, taking their cue from Geertz's method of "thick

description," they seize upon an event or anecdote . . . and re-read it in such a way as to reveal through the analysis of tiny particulars the behavioral codes, logics, and motive forces controlling a whole society. (Veesser: xi) In this light, one can look upon the motif of storytelling as extremely consequential since, as aforementioned, it deals with purely Palestinian traits and habits. Sameh, one character in the novel, confesses that they - the Palestinian people- "did not know their history". They "needed to gather the stories of every village so they would remain alive in [their] memories" (Khoury: 49). This seemingly simple sentence encapsulates the gist of the matter inasmuch as it explains one Palestinian idiosyncrasy; that is; the importance of the story. Storytelling has become a pure Palestinian feature. It is one of the many habits through which the Palestinian defence mechanism manifests itself. The idea of narrative as a means of survival is central to Arabic literature beginning with *The Thousand and One Nights*, and its application to the context of Palestine is quite apropos. In actuality, the reminiscences of Khaleel are life-saving attempts to bring Yunis back to consciousness notwithstanding the fact that Khaleel, himself, as well as all of the characters in the novel, desperately need to be rescued from the pitfall of oblivion. Similarly, the stories narrated in the novel play the role of keepsakes; they shake off the blurred halo with which memory is covered.

The life-saving aspect of storytelling becomes most conspicuous in Dunya`s case. Dunya was one of the innumerable victims who survived the indescribable atrocity of the Sabra and Shatila massacre. Dunya was left incapacitated after being raped by the Israeli forces. She, then, became " a new kind of storyteller, one who tells her stories only to foreigners, and she became a story herself." (Khoury: 241) As the story comes to an end, Dunya passes away and the reader is informed that she collapsed because she stopped narrating her story since her mother was infuriated and ashamed from such a scandal. Salim Asad, another character in the novel, is a young man whose family is murdered in front of his eyes and his hair turns white when he is seven years old. He perpetually narrates his story and sometimes fabricates it in order to seek refuge in the imaginary realm of fantasy. He uses his story to sell shampoos and convince his customers that he

has invented a product that can magically restore colour to his long-bleached white hair. Once again, his sad story sums up the despair of the massacre's survivors.

Stories are, thus, a means of survival. Khaleel is not only trying to save Yunis but he is desperately trying to save his tortured self. He cries: " I am a prisoner of this hospital. Like all prisoners, I live on memories. Prison is a storytelling school...Reach out your hand and pluck me from the pool of storytelling in whose waters I am drowning. I am a prisoner who owns nothing but the stories he makes up about his freedom. I am a prisoner of the story." (132) Khaleel is tied to his story through a love-in-hate relationship.

The imaginary country that is Palestine left its children entrapped in its shadow. The Palestinian identity became exclusively characterized by some very important traits. The storytelling motif, that I have just profusely revealed, concerns itself with a more important theme; that is, memory. Memory is a Palestinian dilemma and solution seeing that the Palestinians, simultaneously, need to forget and remember. Khaleel wisely puts his people's dilemma as he states that the "war started up again, and there was the long siege that destroyed the camp and the cemetery and memories of the massacre. As with all disasters, the only thing that can make one forget a massacre is an even bigger massacre, and we are a people whose fate it is to be forgotten as a result of its accumulated calamities. Massacre erases massacre, and all that remains in the memory is the smell of blood." (259) The Palestinian people need to let go of the devastating memories of their past but, still, they cannot afford to lose their grips on the one memory that brings them back to the beginning of all things; the memory of a ruined and stolen homeland. This paradoxical nature of Palestinian memory becomes more understandable as we read the next lines in which Khaleel expounds more on the process of forgetting and remembering.



It amazed me that people could remember such painful things. Why would not they forget? And a terrible thought came into my mind - that people are only the phantoms of their memories." (48)

We forget, and forgetting is a blessing. Without forgetting we would have died of fright and maltreatment. Memory is the process of organising what to forget. (149)

The novel, in this sense, sheds light on the extraordinary way with which the Palestinians have lived their lives for the past fifty years. They clung to memories, pictures, videos and the voices of loved ones coming from far away, carried on by mute telephone cables. Ordinary means of communication were transformed into a way of life. Abu Kamal, one of the many minor characters in the novel, gives a perfect picture of how his people became addicted to the opium of memory and how Palestine became a video nation.

They sit around their televisions and run the tapes, and they see things I do not. That is not Palestine, cousin. Those pictures do not look like our villages, but I do not know what has got into everyone, they are glued to their television sets. There is no electricity, and they still play them, subscribing to Hajj Isma`eel`s generator just for the video. They pay twenty dollars a month and go hungry so they can watch the tapes; they sit in their houses and look at those films they say are Palestine. We are a video nation and our country has become a video country... All people do is swap videotapes in whose images we find the strength to continue. We sit in front of the small screen and see small spots, distorted pictures and close-ups, and from these we invent the country we desire. We invent our life through pictures. (427-429)

Evidently, the Palestinian people have learned to live on their memories for they found nothing more solid than the past to base their shattered lives upon. This nostalgic turn of mind is a symptom of defeated nations, nation that live vicariously through the glory and heroism of bygone times. Such nostalgic reminiscences made Khaleel`s grandmother hug her pillow and take such care to change the flower heads she stuffed it with, saying it was the smell of El Ghabsiyyeh. Also, it drove Umm Hassan to cut an orange from the branch so that she could taste Palestine and, then, yelling at Khaleel when he was about to eat an orange she brought back to the camp from her visit to the homeland. For her, the orange "is Palestine."



And the night around me is does not pass,  
and no one around me to share my hurt and lie  
(truthfully) for my soul,  
or blame my fragility so that I might blame him,  
and the distance between my loved ones and me  
is uglier than a government

Mourid Barghouti

# The Spirit of Palestine

What deprives the spirit of its colours?  
What is it other than the bullets of the invaders that have  
hit the body?  
Mourid Barghouti

In *History of English Literature*, Hippolyte Adolphe Taine advances the existence of 'spiritual forms' for different races and cultures as being what makes up the "grand scenario of history's master narrative. Those races and cultures constitute the pure essences of history." (Davis and Schleifer: 10) Drawing on the existence of pure "spiritual forms", Taine further extrapolates 'general traits, certain characteristics of thought and feeling common to men belonging to a particular race, epoch, or country', what Taine calls the *faculté maitresse*. In Taine's historical criticism, the critic literally follows the trail of documents and reconstructions to the inner dimensions of history so as finally to enable penetration into the soul itself, that is, into the 'invisible man'. New historicism drew upon Taine's former ideas and it also advocated that an institution such as literature, therefore, can be deduced to be a 'transcript of contemporary manners and customs and the sign of a particular state of intellect'. Although this paper generally tries to unearth, from the dust of sorrow and oblivion, the 'spiritual form' of the Palestinian nation. However, this chapter will be particularly concerned with Palestinian manners, idiosyncrasies and characteristics of thought in the hope that one may delve into the Palestinian soul.

The Palestinian temperament stands out by what I call the state of *in between-ess*; a state where life stands on the thin line that separates death from life, illusion from reality and sorrow from joy. The Palestinian refugees do not only live in a camp on the border-edge between Lebanon and their homeland, they live on the edge between many polarities. One could, for instance, interpret Yunis' coma in an

allegorical fashion. He lies, spent and comatose on a makeshift bed in a makeshift camp that is nothing but the "tomb of Palestine." (467) Accordingly, the whole nation has been involuntarily plunged into a lethargic coma from which it tries to sustain its sanity and consciousness. At one point, Khaleel asks Yunis whether he knows where he is now, and then answers:

Everything here isn't itself but a simulacrum of itself. We say house but we don't live in houses, we live in places that resemble houses. We say Beirut but we aren't really in Beirut, we're in a semblance of Beirut. I say doctor but I'm not a doctor, I'm just pretending to be one. Even the camp itself--we say we're in the Shatila camp, but after the War of the Camps and the destruction of eighty percent of Shatila's houses, it's no longer a camp, it's just a semblance of a camp. (108)

It is a sham world where illusions are real and reality is, in itself, an illusion. Khoury once claimed, in one of his interviews, that "reality can become metaphor or a myth. But a myth, if it will become a reality, it's the most savage thing in the world. The Israeli project is to make a myth into reality". I would, here, like to add that one other aim of the Israeli project is to change reality into a myth and that is manifested in their systematic denial of Palestinian presence prior to 1948. One of the sources that Khoury used, in writing this epic-like novel, was Benny Morris' book, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem* in which the latter propagated the myth that the Palestinians are to blame for their situation, and that Israel need not take up the responsibility for this situation. Zionism is the separation of knowledge from ethics and the use of fabricated knowledge for an immoral goal, or the transformation of some knowledge to a depraved ideology. Michel Foucault has asserted that knowledge is hegemony and his recognition that the structures of knowledge, information and decision-making in modern Western society are predicated on claims to power echoes Nietzsche's argument that all claims to truth are in reality claims to power. In actuality, this viewpoint is similar to the arguments made by Marx and Althusser; that the truth was simply a

version of events preferred and imposed by the dominant ruling group in society. In this context, the new historicist question always comes to mind; how to use the hegemony of knowledge and whom should it serve?

Naturally, the myths that Israel propagate will only serve its interests. One dominant Israeli narrative that, sadly, resurfaces in Arab circles holds that Palestinians sold their land or were encouraged to do so by Arab leaders. The novel's beauty lies in its ability to circumvent this argument and show how the land was stolen and how the peasants, who choose life over death, were forced to desert their own land. Forced to become the protagonist of such a mythic fairytale, the Palestinians are engaged in an everyday struggle with facts and myths. Memory is their haven and treasure for, after the passage of more than 50 years of exile and dispossession, they have to cling to the one fact that is of exceeding importance; that Palestine was a land with a people, given to a people with no land. In order not to forget, narrative and remembrance are the means through which the Palestinians maintain the sustenance of survival and endurance. Storytelling is a defeated nation's way of preserving its memories, keeping itself alive and reminding the world of its existence, its refusal to surrender. Khaleel, exasperated, asks Yunis: "Do you believe we can construct our country out of these ambiguous stories? And why do we have to construct it? People inherit their countries as they inherit their languages. Why do we, of all the peoples of the world, have to invent our country every day so everything isn't lost and we find we've fallen into eternal sleep?"(354)

In this sense, Khoury seems to admit the limits of storytelling as an act of resistance, since it can draw one further away from the reality it is intended to recall. For Yunis, reality seems to be slipping away since he has fallen into an "eternal sleep". Khaleel tells the sleeping man: "In your eyes I see the image of a man who neither lives nor dies."(15) On one occasion, Khaleel compares a sleeper to a dead man; a sleeper's soul leaves his body only to return when he wakes. Again, this notion of life in death and death in life is consequential to the Palestinian idiosyncrasy of *in between-ess* or suspension. In numerous times, the hospital is referred to as being "suspended in a vacuum" and the refugees' eyes are often suspended in their faces. In fact, after

1948, and the fall of Ein el Zeitoun, Yunia was done for, "mistaking the living for the dead and the dead for the living. Everything got confused for [the] people, and [they] spent years after this first great disaster trying to draw a line between the dead and the living." (163)

The Palestinians not only lost track of reality but, in a sense, they suffered from a devastating sense of self-loss. It is not a matter of identity crisis; in act, it is a reality crisis. Resounding the absurd theme of Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, Khaleel states: "We behaved and talked as though we were heroes in novels without authors, novels we all knew and which we narrated every day. We ended up not speaking when we spoke but repeating sentences we had learned by heart... it was as though we were mimicking ourselves." (143) Literature, sleep and even death are often alluded to, in the novel, as magical means by which a Palestinian could escape his ruthless reality. In fact, Bab El Shams is the only place where the two lovers could "feel something real" since the cave serves as an alternative to a world long lost and forsaken.

"People no longer knew who they were or who their family was or where their villages were." (59) They lived in the expectation of something that would come, as though were not in a real place and the sense of confusion is so unbearable that Khaleel often asks: "who am I and who are you?" (377), "what is my real self?" (133) and "why do I feel that things that happened to me or to others have turned into shadows?". This state of shadowy existence is more emphasized as Khaleel confesses that he has lived his whole life without being convinced it was his life.

The second Palestinian idiosyncrasy is again paradoxical. They cherish the gift of life though, unlike any other nation, they have embraced death and lived with its bitterness. Throughout the novel, death is ubiquitous and, as mentioned before, it actually sets off with the death of one of the characters. There is, for instance, a constant reference to the dead who were left unburied. Palestinians "were born,



and die, in death" (446) they see themselves as "potential martyrs" for death is an everyday occurrence. Khaleel, however, is the exception that proves the rule. He shows the reader that though Palestinians have grown accustomed to death, it still remains a fearful event that one can never habituate oneself to. Khaleel confesses: "I lived with death, but I could not absorb it, and everybody died... I would dream of having children and get scared. I told Shams that the most horrible thing that could happen to a person was to lose their son or daughter. Even though I live in the midst of this desolate people that have grown accustomed to losing its children, I cannot imagine myself in that situation. (68) Although Palestinians live a life of death, they continue "seeking the aroma of life and are waiting." As Khaleel ecstatically states: "How I love love... Tomorrow we will sing and relive our loves." (44) This unconquerable will to live and survive pain is also shown in all their stories from which they "squeeze joy out of sorrow." They ululate at times of joy, marriage, farewell, departure and even death. In fact, [their] lives took place between one ululation and the next. Every camp ululates, for [Palestinians] are all martyrs." (295)

The Palestinian has his joys too. He has his pleasures alongside his sorrows. He has the amazing contradictions of life, because he is a living creature before being the son of the eight o'clock news. You meet these contradictions in the stories of the Intifada people tell: there was one chap who since we were children in Deir Ghassanah we had known for his burnt cheek. He used to argue with the village barber that he should get a 50 percent discount because he only shaved one side of his face... He travelled to the Emirates to visit relatives and regaled their guests with stories of how his face got burnt in the Intifada... We have become used to reading the tragedy and the comedy on the same page, in the same event, and in the same treaty, in the same speech, in defeat and in victory, in weddings and funerals, homeland and exile, and in the features of

our one face every morning. (Bargouti: 119- 123)

The third Palestinian idiosyncrasy is of great import since it is a symptom of defeat; it is a deep-rooted belief in the supernatural, the mystic and the miraculous. When told that the "voices of the dead roam the streets at night", Khaleel asserts that he does not "believe such superstitious nonsense." (244) Azeez Ayoub, for instance, was hailed as a saint and "people made oaths in his name and ... he could cure illnesses." (322) People invent saints; they invent wonders and believe in them because they need them. Similar superstitious convictions were exposed in the novel and the following passage is but one case in point.

In El Ghabsiyyeh, we love the moon, and we fear it. When it is full, we do not sleep... My mother would not let me sleep. She would tie a black scarf around her neck and ask me to look at the face of the moon so I could see my dead father's face... I would say that I saw him, though I swear I did not. But now, can you believe it, now, after years and years, when I look at the face of the moon, I see my father's face, stained with blood. My mother said they killed him, left him in a heap at the door and went off." (11)

Before the novel begins, Khoury provides his readers with an extremely interesting epigraph. Although the story in the epigraph may pass unnoticed, I have found it to be laden with meanings. As Humphrey Davies, the translator of the novel, notes, the epigraph "is not consistent, linguistically or literarily, with the rest of the book. It invokes a different world."

He said, God be pleased with him: Shaykh Al Junayd set out on a journey of devotion and while travelling was overtaken by thirst. He found a well that was too deep to draw water from, so he took off his girdle, lowered it into the well until it reached the water, and set about raising and lowering it and squeezing it into his mouth. A dervish appeared and asked him, "why do it so? Tell the water to rise, and drink with your hands!" and the dervish approached the edge of the well and said to the water, "rise, with God's permission," and it rose and the shaykh and the dervish drank. Afterwards the shaykh turned to the dervish and said, "who are you?" "One of God's creatures," he replied. "Who is your shaykh?" asked Al Junayd. "My shaykh is AL, Junayd, though I have yet to set eyes on him," replied the man. "Then how did you attain these powers?" asked the shaykh. "Through my faith in my shaykh," replied the man.

True, the former passage invokes a different world than that of the novel. However, one cannot fail to notice that they were both written in the same spirit. This mystical story draws attention to the importance of faith and the wonders one can do if only one guards oneself with the indomitable power of belief. The story, with all its religious nuances, borders on the edge of superstition. This is a theme that, as aforementioned, recurs throughout the novel. The Palestinian people wholeheartedly believe in the power of Almighty God and they do not allow religious scepticism as Khaleel once demonstrated. However, due to lack of education in the early generations, they have sometimes confused religious views with superstitious ones.

# Women ... Woo Men

I know -when I see a woman in love, I know. She overflows with love and becomes soft and undulating. Not men. Men are to be pitied because they do not know that softness that floods and leavens the muscles. (12)



Women, in Palestine, are unlike any other women in the world or rather, to be more precise, they are the embodiment of womanhood when realized. They stand as miraculous examples of the full potential of their sex; a potential that is often thwarted and underestimated. In fact, their traumatic existence has had its toll on their inborn passion and intuitive insight; it made best use of all feminine gifts and talents and, in this maximum exploitation, the tragedy comes more into being. The *Gate of the Sun* pays its tributes to the women of Palestine who are the true heroines of this heroic masterpiece.

Interestingly, the novel sets off with the death of Umm Hassan who is represented as the voice of intuition and the paragon of courage in a time when everyone was coloured with the shame of defeat. "No one would have doubted Umm Hassan because she always told the truth. Had not she been the only one to weep on the morning of 5 June 1967? Everyone was dancing in the streets, anticipating going home to Palestine, but she wept." (2) She emotionally knew, as all mothers are bound to know. She was, in a sense, what was left from Palestine. Umm Hassan told Khaleel, who was born in a camp in Lebanon, everything about Palestine. In this sense, she represents the memory of the motherland. It is the mothers, grandmothers and wives that keep the memory alive of the lands from which they were driven. It is the women that carry the children and the old people as the Israelis drive them from one place to the next. Throughout the novel, women become more and more identified with the homeland. By way of example, Yunis believed that "a woman is the smell of the world" and that when he was with Naheeleh, he learned to "fill his lungs with the smell of the land. "He adds: "I did not fight, my friend, for the land or for history. I fought for the sake of a woman I loved." (20) In this sense, Palestine and the beloved become one and the same. In fact, when Khaleel presents himself as the "only one who has none of that self-confidence that mothers can give, he is unconsciously analyzing his problem. Born to a generation that has never seen its homeland, Khaleel was not only abandoned by his mother but he was also deprived of the warmth and confidence that is evoked from the native soil. Mothers and

motherlands breast-feed their children the milk of love, confidence and strength.

True, a woman is a "deep secret" and making love is the "secret of life" and, thus, Palestinian women are the breeders of life. Yunis, for instance, is the "man who plants his children in Galilee and fights to liberate them." (390) Naheeleh's never-ending pregnancy echoes that of other Palestinian women. Bab al-Shams produced seven sons, three daughters and twenty-five grandchildren. In this sense, childbirth has become, first and foremost, a Palestinian weapon. Naheeleh aptly comments: "my belly would swell up and my children filled the house. I swelled up so I would not die. I would get pregnant and I would feel the life beating in my belly and I would fill out." (200) It is also interesting to note that Um Hassan, the only midwife in Shatila, though childless, is described as the "mother of all mothers" from the Galilee. "All she had left was a son called Naji, who lived in America. Though Naji was not her real son, he was: she had picked him up him up from beneath an olive tree on the El Kabri-Tarshiha road and fed him from her dry breasts." (4) In her long life, Umm Hassan had buried her four children one after the other and, by that, she has experienced the sorest of all pains. Loss of children is a deadening experience that Palestinian mothers have grown to endure. However, they resist death by giving birth to other children. This, in fact is a Palestinian feature; Naheeleh and Yunis, alone, created a family of more than 30 members. Abu Ma'arouf, one character in the novel, for instance, lost his wife and three children during the bombing of Saffouri by Israeli planes on 15 July 1948 and yet he married again in Lebanon and had had seven boys and girls. A more prominent example would be given by the Barghoutis who constitute the single largest Palestinian family, with estimated numbers running as high as 25,000. (Said in Barghouti: xi). Women, again, emerge as the source of life and power.

Naheeleh and Yunis, like all Palestinians, bore the loss of Ibraheem, their first-born child, who was brutally murdered by some Yemeni Jewish children. After the child's death, Naheeleh was on the verge of madness and nothing would console her. Yunis, on the other hand, dealt with his pain the way men do; he fled. Actually, Khaleel

understood this manly cowardliness, if ever there was such a thing, when he claims that "manliness, or what we call manliness, consists of flight because, inside all the bluster and bullying and big words, there is a refusal to face up to life." (55) Palestinian women are characterized by their persistence as they stand tall no matter what vicissitudes they might happen to encounter. For Khoury, Yunis, of course, is a hero. He used to go to Galilee, he used to cross the borders... but in the end we discover that he was less heroic than, Naheeleh whose story was the most poignant. She was a woman warrior who defended her family and told the Israeli interrogator that she was a prostitute so as not to expose her husband's presence. With a courage that is rare in men, she cried: "Disgraceful! You stole our country and drove out its people, and now you come and give us lessons in morals?" (273) In an interview in *The Independent*, published last year on the eighteenth of November, Khoury said: "in the refugee camps I met hundreds of women like Naheeleh. Then it's no more a metaphor. It's very realistic." Palestinian women are warriors in the true sense of the word. They would root themselves to the land and withstand the aggression of Israel. For instance, Khaleel's grandmother said: "I was like everyone else. I worked the land my late husband had left me. I worked the land before he died and after he died, and he, God bless him, was a fighter, meaning that he would leave me and go off." (307) This is a story that recurred with Naheeleh as well as with every other women. This reality is the "revolution of actual work carried out by our mothers," which the poet Mourid Barghouti articulates so well in his memoir *I Saw Ramallah*. It is "realized every day, without fuss and without theorizing."

Throughout the novel, Naheeleh struggles against the acceptable role of women in Palestinian society; learning to read and recite poetry, leading a march of women to return to their village when they are driven from their homes, and standing up defiantly to the authorities when questioned on her husband's whereabouts. I believe that Khoury presented women, in the novel, as an alter ego for Palestine. A woman is the motherland that was defeated, abused and mistreated. At one point in the story, Khaleel casually states that "our bad treatment of women was the reason we had failed and been defeated." (71) By his own confession, Khaleel was merely theorizing



since he did not really mean these words; however he -unawares- has struck a vital chord. At that point in time, women were extremely patronized. For instance, Naheeleh`s mother did not manage to keep the land she inherited from her husband because Ahmad Ibn Mahmoud, one of the local bosses of the revolution, believed that women "should never be entrusted with land." As a result, she ended up working on his land, a servant in his house and got beaten the same as his wives."(76). Moreover, Khoury presents the character of Shams, Khaleel`s lover, in a sympathetic light notwithstanding the fact that she had an affair with an other person and that she killed him because he has refused to marry her. However, as her story unfolds, we discover that she was extremely abused by her inhumane husband who was more of a psychopath than a man. Violence and underestimation, at one point of time, may be a manifestation of the 'tyranny of the weak ' theory. Violence only breeds more violence.

Women were taken too lightly and it was an attitude that commenced long before 1948. Sheheeneh, Khaleel`s grandmother, also sheds light on how women were treated at that time. She remembers:" I did not sleep on the bed after he died, because a bed is for men. He would sleep on the bed and I would sleep on a mattress on the floor beneath. Then he started making me sleep in the bed next to him. He said it was because he loved me. In our day ... no-one used that word. A husband loved his wife, but he would not tell her."(319) Women were treated as second-class citizens insofar as Khaleel`s grandmother claims: "in those days, God help me, I used to think there was an Arabic language for men and an Arabic language for women." As a matter of fact, Khaleel - who sometimes seems to be the voice of Palestinian conscience - questions the romantic longing for the impoverished, primitive society of old in which Umm Hassan "had gotten married at fifteen 'to chase away the chickens from the front of the house,' as her mother-in-law had said when she had asked for her hand."

According to Khoury, men lack an effective organ of love, while the whole of the woman`s body constitutes such an organ. Women, he

believes, hold the repositories of memory. Naheeleh roots herself in the homeland which she symbolizes in the time when Yunis flees to Lebanon. It is the men who narrate in *Bab Al-Shams* and this seems to be a subversion of traditional male roles since the *1001 Nights* were narrated by a shrewd woman; namely, Scheherazade. The fact that narration is undertaken by men leaves us with the speculation that heroism is left to women like Naheeleh and Shams, who struggle to live as they imagine life should be, in defiance of convention and reality—and they come out victoriously in some way.

In the following excerpt, Naheeleh heroic struggles finally comes into being.

She spoke of the world she had divided into two halves, and the life that was like little squares, and her children. She did not say she had grown tired of poverty. She did not say she had lived in the squares of fear, and that her children (his children) ground her down with their questions and their eyes filled with fear. She did not say she had waited for him to come and say, "come with me", and that she had though he had not said it because of his parents, so she had waited, and when they had died, leaving was no longer possible. (374)

Women are the keepers of the stories. As Yunis was breathing his very last gulps of air, Khaleel spent the night with a phantasmagoric woman who is a hybrid version of both Naheeleh and Shams, the woman whom he deeply loved. As Umm Hassan once said, "man cannot die among men. A man needs a woman to die. Women are different, they are stronger and can die on their own if they want to. But a man needs women so he can die." Khaleel was holding on to Yunis, incapable of accepting the fact of his death. It took a woman to steal him away from the bed of the dying man and, in the moments when love took its course, the soul of Yunis rested after years of

struggle. In the end, the women have the last word.

The human rights agenda as related to the Occupied Palestinian Territory paid particular attention to the deteriorating status of women. Palestinian women of all ages and social classes represent half of the Palestinian population. Similar to the women characters in *Gate of the Sun*, they have strenuously challenged their socially-defined gender roles through their political participation, including involvement in marches and demonstrations and, at times, even serious confrontation with the Israeli army. "The Right to Life, Liberty and Security, the Right to Health, Reproductive Health and Family Planning, the Right to be Free from Discrimination and the Right to Not be Subjected to Torture or Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment" are but few rights that the Israeli policy has breached. Since the beginning of the Intifada in September 2000, a recorded 69 births at the checkpoint have occurred. Checkpoints have exposed women to cruel and inhumane treatment as well as discrimination based on their nationality. More tragic still is the number of women who go unrecorded; those women whose physical and psychological trauma is never counted in the official statistics. Palestinian women, as Khaleel describes them, "suppress everything. They do not complain and do not say anything and fence themselves in with silence and secrets?"(416)

During a model parliament, that was held in the Gaza Strip a couple of years ago, Palestinian women's rights activists called for making the minimum age for marriage 18 for both women and men since, under the erstwhile Egyptian law, women, or more precisely girls, could get married at age nine. As a matter of fact, the novel mentions many incidents when young men tie the knot once they reach adulthood. Yunis, for instance, married a younger Naheeleh when he was no more than 14 years old. The parliament also called for the abolishing of a law requiring women to get permission from a male relative to marry. "The parliament's goal was to change long-term attitudes that women aren't strong enough to decide anything, and that only their brothers or fathers can decide," said Murwa Kassem, the

model parliament's Gaza coordinator. "We needed to start somewhere."

Nonetheless, the phenomenon of the Palestinian woman deserves unhesitating admiration, but her complete story has not been written yet. Palestinian women have also long had an extensive organizational network and were active in the six-year *Intifada* or uprising against Israeli occupation. Throughout the years of the Intifda, when women saw a young man captured by Israeli soldiers, they would attack the soldiers, all of them crying and screaming: " My son, my son - leave my son alone." On this occasion the soldier dragging the young men away, shouts: " Go, you liar. How many mothers for one boy! A hundred mothers for one boy? They respond " yes, we are like that. A boy here has a hundred mothers, not like your kids, every boy has a hundred fathers!"... People also tell of that woman in whose house a Palestinian fugitive took refuge: she hid him for seven years."(Barghouti: 37) All Palestinian women are mothers, though they may be childless as Umm Hassan. Interestingly, this amazing concept of surrogate parenting is a characteristic feature of the Palestinian culture. Yunis once told Khaleel: "I picked you out when you were nine and I loved you, and I asked them at the boy`s camp If I could take care of you, and you became my son."(17)



She wants to go to a planet away from the earth  
where the paths are crowded with people running to their  
rooms  
and where the beds in the morning are chaos  
and the pillows wake up crumpled,  
their cotton stuffing dipping in the middle.  
She wants the washing lines full and much, much rice to  
cook for lunch  
and a large, large kettle boiling on the fire in the  
afternoon  
and the table for everyone in the evening, its tablecloth  
dripping with the sesame of chatter  
she wants the smell of garlic at noon to gather the absent  
ones  
and is surprised that the mother`s stew is weaker than the  
power of governments  
and that her pastry in the evening  
Dries on a sheet untouched by any hand  
Can he earth contain the cruelty of a mother making her  
coffee alone  
On a Diaspora morning?  
She wants to go to a planet away from the earth  
Where all directions lead to the harbor of the bosom,  
The gulf of two arms  
That receive and know no farewells  
She wants airplanes to come back only  
Airports to be for those returning,  
The planes to land and never leave again

Mourid Barghouti

# The Political Game

Hamlet lived in the Rotten State, and I live in the Rotten State...Hamlet was a prince and saw something rotten, and I see something rotten too. Hamlet went mad, and so did I. " (48)

With these simple words, Khaleel summarizes the domestic situation in Palestine concerning politics. If the yoke of internal corruption has already held its sway over a nation, how can it then be able to free itself from the colonizer's unswerving bondage? Of course, it cannot. Unfortunately, this seems to be the case in Palestine. The *zeitgeist* of the twentieth century was, in essence, revolutionary, radical and, in the end, totalitarian. Most, if not all, revolutions ended up as repressive regimes. However, I am still baffled by how people were hypnotized by psychopathic demagogues whose lust for power was blind-folding and disastrous. Political corruption bears its rotten fruits in all countries but, alas, it becomes most bitter when it feeds on the relics of a lost and dying nation, like that of Palestine.

As aforementioned, new historicism discusses, among other things, the life of the author, the political and cultural discourse and the notion of "governmentality" and "circulation". This analytical process of *thick description* will help one in understanding the Palestinian culture as it existed in the last century. The political "discourse" in the last fifty years of the twentieth century was, as I said before, revolutionary and grandiose. However, the discourse emerged from the leftist ideologies that swept the Third World and left it disillusioned.

Ideology is always the invisible, invidious force which unconsciously determines the limits and norms



of thought and action through its material institutions, penetrating society and culture to the extent that it operates as unexamined common sense, the most rudimentary assumptions of that society and culture. Ideological hegemony is a complex system with a myriad of internal structures, contradictions and processes of change, that works on a fundamental level ' deeply saturating the consciousness of a society' (Williams: 37)

With the exodus from Beirut, after the Israeli invasion, Palestinian officials put more of a triumphant note into their general discourse... They pushed up the level of the language of Glory, resistance and victory... In those days it was not permissible to violate the general contentment. It was not permissible to bring back and examine the phases of a chain of events and its results ... Wrongdoers are immune to criticism (Barghouti: 123)

The ideology of revolution did penetrate and saturate the consciousness of the Palestinian society and this, in fact, validates the theory of circulation. I remember how Mourid Barghouti, in his memoirs, recounts viewing a picture of Guevara in Ghassan Kanafani's house. This minute detail is a text in itself since it empowers our vision of the past. Now one can understand why new historicists argue that all levels of society share in the circulation of power through the production and distribution of the most elementary cultural and social "texts." Power does not reside somehow "above," with lawyers, politicians, and the police, but rather follows a principle of circulation, whereby everyone participates in the maintenance of existing power structures. By being subservient and servile, one participates in a smooth circulation of power. Accordingly, in an interview to *Banipal* magazine, Khoury said: "criticism was very difficult because in our consciousness the Palestinian revolution was sacred. You could not criticize it. Nevertheless we did. At some point Arafat wanted to put me in prison but then I resigned from the PLO Research Centre, and Mahmoud Darwish also left." He, then, added

that " writing was very important because it gave [him] the chance to rethink and to understand what was going on."

In the same interview, Khoury attributes his work with the Palestinian resistance, in itself a revolutionary movement, to the fact that he was influenced by the hegemony of the revolutionary discourse. His words are of extreme value.

That is how I joined the resistance. I continued with them also after they moved to Lebanon. I was a student, influenced by the ideas of Che Guevara, Mao Tse Tung, and others.

When you write literature you cannot insert the ideology of historical optimism which was in fashion, Mao Tse Tung etc. Ideology cannot work in literature and it cannot really work in life either because it covers reality and it covers atrocities and I cannot be part of that.

With the civil war, language became meaningless. In the years directly preceding the Israeli invasion of 1982, everybody was speaking the same language.

In the new historicist vision, Khoury is, thus, the author par excellence. By his own confession, he was involuntarily assimilated into the spirit of the age. One is, now, more able of relating Khoury's words to those of his protagonist. Throughout the novel, Khaleel makes a number of references to the Cultural Revolution in China and to pictures of Guevara and Mao Tse Tung. He also cynically repeats the discourse of his time through phrases like " Chairman Mao Tse Tung, a thousand years more" as he recounts how, after the revolution ended, all crimes were revealed. This Chinese slogan was not bereft of its loving sisters; the Arabic slogans. Narrated in 1995, Khaleel echoes Khoury's disillusionment as he remembers how they were "intoxicated by the wine of revolution - a word with magic properties that resemble ...magic." (146) However, even the spell of magic is due to come to an end. Khaleel claimed that the members of the Palestinian leadership who migrated to Tunis and are still alive

went back to Gaza, where there is an Authority and police and prisons and all the trimmings.... They ended up with offices and guards and a Revolution. (395). Police and prisons are symbols of political oppression while offices stand for ineffective bureaucracy. When the revolution turned to a state represented in the Palestine Liberation Organization, it acquired the corruption of regimes but none of the benefits that come with autonomy. The new historical notion of governmentality is, thus, smeared by that which is often found in post-colonial governments; namely, corruption and more corruption.

In the following excerpts, Khaleel gives voice to the thoughts of a disenchanted people. The bitter sense of disillusionment becomes most apparent.

The end of a revolution is the ugliest thing there is. A revolution is like a person: it gets senile and rambles and wets itself... I revert to China to tell you that history bewitched me during those two weeks of intensive military training. I discovered how possible it was possible for me to open a book of history and enter into it and be the reader and the read at the same time. This is the illusion that revolution creates for us. It makes us believe we are both the individual and the mirror, and it leads to monstrosity. (147)

Everyone at the base dived into "the meat of the revolution". Our great problem was that the Revolution was rich while our people are poor. The problem is over now- the Revolution has moved on, leaving nothing here in the camp but this poverty that is destroying us. (311)

The affluence of the Palestinian leaders is a symptom of corruption and nonchalance. Corrupt as it is, the revolution employed a demagogic style that rejected well-wrought ideas and concepts. This dictatorial exclusion becomes apparent when Khaleel was punished

for his lack of faith. He claimed that he wanted the fedayeen to acquire political consciousness, to liberate the individual and not just the land. He, then, questions: " Is that any way to deal with people - punishing a Political Commissar in front of his men for expressing an opinion... Abu El Fida got very angry with me and ordered me to hand over my weapon and crawl on the ground in front of the platoon.

And I crawled. (46)

As is, the revolution became an institution that encompassed, in its turn, other fake and ineffective establishments; for instance, the Galilee hospital which is more of a hotel for the dying than a medical hospital. The quasi Palestinian state fought for freedom and yet failed to put it into practice. As Khoury asserted, the PLO allowed no criticism of its establishments. Khoury said nothing less than the truth and, apparently, his experience was transformed in the following words,                      uttered                      by                      Khaleel.

The self-criticism sessions I learned in China and tried to apply here ... made me a laughingstock. I would call a self-criticism session and start with myself to encourage the others, and the meeting would end in jokes. No-one was capable of confessing to his own mistakes, and they would all find justifications for their actions. To put an end to the joking around and the obnoxiousness, I would be forced to agree with them that we had not made any mistakes at all, even in the case of the village of El Eishiyyeh in South Lebanon, which we entered in the summer of 1975 after a gruelling battle with the Phalangists. Our commanding officer ordered the armed fighters who had surrendered to stand against a wall and executed them all with machine guns. The execution of captives is forbidden by the laws of the Fatah Movement, but we discovered justifications for our mistake-crime. We said we were taking revenge for the massacres that had been committed against

us, that civil wars always involved massacres. (261)

As the saying goes, two wrongs do not make a right; however, the Palestinian leaders were adamantly consistent in their view of themselves. They saw themselves as the sole representatives of the people and, in doing that, they excluded all other counsels.

# The Conspiracy Continues

New historicism projects a vision of history as an "endless skein of cloth smocked in a complex, overall pattern by the needle and thread of Power. You need only pull the thread at one place to find it connected to another." (Porter: 765) A comprehensive reading of the text would naturally necessitate a scrutiny of power and its relations as suggested in the text. Also, the critic tries to discover whether power is operating explicitly or implicitly in the text. One should, first, proceed with the fact that power is essential to a just society provided that it is exerted by all. However, the moment we cease to acknowledge the rightful power of other individuals we deny their humanity. Foucault argues that power is not merely physical force but a pervasive human dynamic determining our relationships to others. It also refers to the surreptitious ways in which a dominant group exerts its influence over others.

Though this hegemonic power may rely on the threat of punishment, it does not necessarily rely on actual physical enforcement on a day-to-day basis. By way of example, the colonialist power is enforced in Palestine by the fact that "Palestinian children in Israel learned Hebrew in school." (387) As Khaleel complains, "like all [his] generation, [he] had had no serious schooling. From elementary school [they] joined the cadet camps of the various military forces. (138) The real world is no less different than that of the novel. On November 23 the Israeli paper Haaretz reported about an Israeli commander who had been indicted for shooting a 13-year-old Palestinian girl who was on her way to school in Rafah. The army communications network tape showed that the soldiers involved "kept firing at the girl even after she had been identified by soldiers as 'about 10 years old.'" Palestinian hospital officials said the girl was shot at least 15 times, mostly in the upper body. If knowledge is denied, power is consecutively denied. Actually, the Palestinian experience is, as in everything else, exceptional in its subjection to power. The actual physical enforcement of power, in Palestine, is practiced every minute of every day. As Foucault puts it, "slavery is not a power relationship

when man is in chains."(Foucault: 221) One should name things as they are for slavery is, thus, not a relationship; it is subjection and repression. In *Gate of the Sun*, power lies at the centre of the action as it poses itself as the hideous villain that it is. The novel takes the reader by hand and travels with him to the time when the nightmare of dispossession began.

On one occasion, Khaleel remembers when Yunis told him how the Israeli soldiers chose about forty young men and drove them ahead of them, and after they disappeared from sight, firing was heard. They killed the young men and then drove the rest like sheep. The humiliation, the agony, the atrocity of the narrated events is beyond human comprehension. In fact, Yunis recalled much more ruthless scene of the Palestinian flight to death.

We are not begging for your sympathy. We are requesting it and will repay it. If you treat us well, we will repay your good deeds with even better ones. Tomorrow, as you know, Arab armies will enter Palestine, and we will defeat you " a young officer then went up to Yusif and slapped his face. then he pulled out his revolver and fired at Yusif`s head and the man's brains scattered over the ground. (164)

We received them with white sheets. We went out carrying the sheets as a sign of surrender, but they started firing over our heads. Then they ordered us to gather in the square. They chose sixty men of different ages, tied their hands with rope and stood them in a row. Sixty men of different ages standing like a wall threaded together by a rope that linked their hands, which were tied behind their backs. Then they started firing. The sound of the machine guns deafened us, and the men dropped, and the people

gathered in the square fled into the fields. Death enveloped us. (201)

The former verbal pictures speak for themselves as they accentuate how people are overpowered by force and how humanity is, at the end of the day, an empty word. Naturally, the novel is laden with similar anecdotes of dispersion, massacres and injustice. The new historicist critic would be interested in examining the recurrent expressions that dominated at the time of the *Nakba*. As is evident in the novel and in "Naji El Ali", an extremely significant movie that was banned by the Egyptian television and recently screened on Arab satellite channels, the Palestinians used the term "sunbath" in reference to the many times where they were collected in squares and left crucified under the sun. "Sunbathing was a basic means of torture." (220) It is not, thus, a coincidence that the novel that carries the name of the sun shows moments where its characters are scorched by its heat and, at the same time, superstitiously afraid from the moon. In my mind's eye, this psychological fear has to do with the fact that most expulsions and forced evacuations are carried out in the hours of darkness. Khaleel asks: "what is this sun culture that is killing us? Only moonlight deserves to be called light. You said that in your village people feared it more than sunstroke, and that was why you would seek cover in the shade from the moon, not the sun." (37) I presume that this fear only stands as a witness to an exaggerated use of force insofar as the elements of nature were employed to torment a people who would have, otherwise, loved to bask in the warmth of the sun. Unfortunately, as Khaleel puts it, the Palestinians became "a vast mass of humanity twisting under the sun and waiting for death. Later we discovered that we were to spend the rest of our lives in the sunbath." (220)

Since the novel spans more than fifty years of Palestinian suffering, it also exposes the consequences of the exodus. Abd El Mu`ti, one of many refugees, commented on the life in the camps: "Now you see camps but in the beginning the camp consisted of a group of tents. Then later, after we had built huts, they allowed us to roof them. It was said that if we put proper roofs on our houses, we would forget Palestine, so we put up zinc sheets. Do you know what zinc sheets do



to you under the Beirut sun? (220) Furthermore, Khaleel also refers to the "banana days" when the Palestinians "spread the leaves on the ground and covered the roofs and the sides of the tents with them, and lived with the rottenness. The leaves rotted, and [they] rotted beneath them and on top of them." (330) Once again, the experience is transformed into an expression that informs one with pain as nothing else does.

Rape is another manifestation of the colonizer's power and particularly that of Israel seeing that it is a state that based itself upon the humiliation and degradation of a whole nation. Rape is a symbol since men often connote war with rape. Victory signifies the victor raping the defeated enemy's women; it is only complete when the women are subjected to rape. Dunya was raped and her hollow eyes became suspended in her face just as the whole people were "suspended in a vacuum". The land is raped and so are the women. In fact, and as shall be demonstrated, the novel presents the women as symbols of a land that has to be rediscovered and nurtured. Although the former discrepancy between colonizer and colonized, men and women, is similar to the postcolonial notion of binary opposites, one should always remember that the experience is overshadowed by very particular Palestinian idiosyncrasies.

The aforementioned events are but manifestations of power and the new historicists are similarly interested in the factors that might threaten the operation of power and they refer to this phenomenon by the name of "subversion". On a larger scale, the writing of the novel is, in actuality, an act of subversion. The countless narrated stories in the novel are acts of subversion and passive resistance as they aim at rebutting the many myths that Israel propagate. To narrate is to subvert; this may pose as the first and foremost unwritten axiom in the novel. However, the novel also cites many incidents of subversion where most, if not all, of the refugees are struck by "return madness". Again, this Palestinian expression gives voice to a Palestinian idiosyncrasy; that is, wistful homesickness. These simple acts of resistance made the Israeli government resort to extreme measures. Of these, the sweeps ordered by Ben Gurion in 1951 are but a case in

point. In those days, the villages of Galilee were haunted by border crossers at night and there were clear orders to shoot anything that moved, harvesting the lives of people. The novel also refers to the Black September operation and the kidnapping of Israel's Olympic athletes in Munich and to the many acts of armed resistance carried out by fedayeen fighters for almost all of the characters have engaged in warfare. The fact that these fighters were originally peasants sheds light on the existing unbalance between the forces of power and those of subversion.

Moreover, new historicists tend to concern themselves with forces of containment and the ways hegemonic forces consolidate the status quo. New Historicists look at moments of rupture to examine how forces of rebellion are still able to be co-opted by the powers that dominate it. They ask this question; how do those with authority attempt to contain any subversion of that authority? The answer is simple. Power is preserved through a higher dose of power. Containment, though a new historical term, has become more of an American-Israeli policy. Starting from the sixties of the last century, and despite its own relatively healthy economy, Israel continued to receive aid from the US, in disproportion to both the country's population and needs. Actually, since 1949 and until the present day, the total amount of aid given to Israel is estimated as \$134,791,507,200, more than \$134 billion. By this, Israel is the largest recipient of US financial aid in the world, receiving over one-third of total US aid to foreign countries, even though Israel's population comprises just .001% of the world's population.

The US law supposedly prohibits providing military aid to any country that "engages in a consistent pattern of gross violations of internationally recognized human rights". Under the 1967 US Arms Export Control Act, it is illegal to use US weapons to carry out extra-judicial killings. This act stipulates that weapons be sold to "friendly countries solely for internal security and legitimate defence." However, the financial aid alone that Israel receives from the US allows it to purchase tanks, helicopter gunships, F-16 war planes, machine guns and bullets - all of which it uses to commit human rights violations

against the Palestinian people on a daily basis. According to a US Department of Defence Joint Report to Congress in March 2001, "It is in the United States' national interest to promote the existence of a stable, democratic and militarily strong Israel, at peace with its neighbour". Also, according to a US State Department statement in November 2002, the US government is committed to "maintaining and enhancing Israel's security and qualitative edge over any combination of adversaries" and "the important advantages the US-Israeli strategic relationship has and will continue to provide us."

It is therefore no exaggeration to say that the US is funding and supplying the Israeli government's occupation of the Palestinian territories, as without financial subsidies from the US, the Israeli government would have found it considerably more difficult to sustain its military occupation of the Palestinian territories for the past forty years. Military power is required for Israel to *contain* and crush resistance. Paradoxically, in its Human Rights Report, the US State Department declared that Israeli army actions were an "excessive use of force", noting that the Israeli forces used live ammunition, even when they were not in imminent danger, and that the Israeli military "shelled PA institutions and Palestinian civilian areas in response to individual Palestinian attacks on Israeli civilians or settlers".

History repeats itself and its unexplained repetition remains to haunt the hearts and minds of those who, like new historicists, try to unravel the mysteries of the present by means of understanding those of the past. By benefit of hindsight, one would discover that truth discloses itself as events become connected in a circle of causality. In another chapter, I shall completely expound upon the Arab status quo; however, I am now interested in highlighting how Israel was capable of advancing its plans and succeeding in implementing 'containment'. I have established an interesting link. On the third of June, 1982, there was an attempted assassination of the Israeli ambassador in London. After only three days of the prior date, Lebanon was invaded by Israel. On the fourteenth of September of the same year, President Bashir Gemayel was assassinated and his assassination was the alibi given to the Sabra and Shatila massacre that took place two days after the assassination. Also, on 22 May 1967, Nasser closes the Straits of Tiran

to Israeli shipping after he requested withdrawal of UN Emergency Force from Sinai and, consequently, on 5 June, the six-day war was waged. Apparently, there is a recurring pattern. The chain of events suggests a premeditated plan of aggression. In fact, it began way before the Arabs were even conscious of the Zionist danger. In a time as early as 1878, the first Jewish colony, Petah Tikhav, was established in Palestine and, in 1897, the First Zionist Congress launched the Basel Program with the aim of resettling the Jewish people in Palestine.

Although in the years between 1899 and 1902, there was Arab-Jewish tension following the large Jewish land purchases that took place in the Tiberias region, not everyone realized the full impact of such purchases. It is probable that, although danger was perceived, none knew their plans or understood the logic of their war. In this case, knowledge is power.

# Conclusion

New historicism is interested in the manner in which the text reveals a historical situation. All imaginable texts, circulating in the last century, are prone to accentuate one very important fact; that is, the Arab world is the epitome of weakness and corruption. Since *Gate of the Sun* narrates the story of the *Nakba*, it could not have ignored referring to the role of the Arab armies in the loss of Palestine. The element of betrayal and internal discord - essentially, an Arab idiosyncrasy- made six hundred thousand Israelis assemble an army that defeated all seven Arab armies put together. In fact, the many references to the Arab Liberation Army in 1948 are accompanied by a sense of disillusionment insofar as one character, remembering the fall of Shafa Amr and the displacement of more than three thousand of its inhabitants, swears that he cannot even remember whether they have fought or not. In the midst of a continuing Arab paralysis, "can one be still surprised by" the explosion of this Arab world that lost its soul a thousand years ago and is flopping around today in its own blood, searching and failing to find it? (396)

As I said before, internal discord, per se, is an Arab idiosyncrasy that brought about nothing but failure, defeat and division. As shareholders in the Arab legacy, the Palestinians have also experienced the pungent consequences of political discord. Sadly, this is shown in the simplest of cases. Khaleel cites one example when they were not able even to collect the names of the victims of the Sabra and Shatila massacre. The community committee met and decided to make a list of the names and they collected innumerable names but still could not arrive at a final record. Differences arose among the different political organizations and the project folded. Short-sighted tribalism is another problem in the Palestinian society as the novel displays one fight that broke out between two clans during the revolution of 1936. These small details, though seemingly

insignificant, are of great import seeing that they represent a pattern from which one could infer how, in times of crises, people reacted.

The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living. (Marx and Engels: 93) This belief acknowledges the burden of past events and traditions; it is an inheritance from which one could never take flight. As new historicism rightfully asserts the past structures and organizes the present, and is an immensely powerful determinant of possibilities for action and thought in the present. Throughout the novel, one gradually envisions the present through the eyes of the past. The similarities are perplexing and, in the same time, paralyzing. One continuing feature is the superficiality of treacherous Arab regimes. By way of example, Khaleel recounts the story of a Lebanese journalist who spoke to him about the wall of the camp. He said the government would soon complete the rebuilding of Sports City, which was demolished by the Israeli planes, and that Beirut was going to host the next Arab games, and it would be better for the Arab athletes if they did not see. For ever and a day, they solve the problem by covering their eyes. However, for the Palestinians, matters were much worse. They could only work in secret in Lebanon unless they acquired a special permit. Also, the nostalgic border-crossers were sometimes arrested and physically abused; for example, the Lebanese interrogator who tortured Yunis, made him swallow his broken teeth, and warned him against crossing the Lebanon-Israel border. The novel, in addition, refers to the Palestinian fedayeen who were thrown out of Jordan in 1970, in what was known as the Black September massacres. Khoury, thus, notes the irony of Arab governments' when one character claims that in Israel, Palestinians would become "the Jews' Jews" while in Lebanon, they became "the Arabs' Arabs."

. While reading in related texts, I was surprised to find the expressions "the Jews' Jews" and "the Arabs' Arabs" recurring. New historical analysis is naturally interested in the connections between language and power in a particular culture. Through using one simple word and repeating it, the Palestinians were shrewdly, and eloquently,

capable of summarizing an Arab stance that is, to say the least, shocking and disgraceful. To validate my claim, I shall resort to some authentic historical facts that days have sadly revealed. The Zionists were looking for an Arab leader who would accept the principle of partition, agree to a Jewish state, and be willing to coexist peacefully with such a state after its establishment. "In 1947 there was only one Arab leader who fit the bill- King Abdullah. Friendly relations had existed between Abdullah and the Zionists ever since the establishment of the emirate of Transjordan. On 17 November 1947, Golda Meir secretly met with King Abdullah and reached a broad understanding with him.

It is true that the military experts of the Arab league had worked out a unified plan for the invasion, but King Abdullah , who was given nominal command over all the Arab forces in Palestine, wrecked this plan by making last-minute changes. His objective in sending his army into Palestine was not to prevent the establishment of a Jewish state but to make himself the master of the Arab part of Palestine. There was no love lost between Abdullah and the other Arab rulers, who resented his expansionist ambitions... Each of the other Arab states was also moved by dynastic or national interests, which were hidden behind the fig leaf of securing Palestine for the Palestinians. The inability of the Arabs to coordinate their diplomatic and military plans was in no small measure responsible for the disaster that overwhelmed them. Israel's leaders knew of these divisions and exploited them to the full factor in determining the course and outcome of the first Arab- Israel war. This factor is largely ignored in Zionist historiography, because it does not sit easily with the heroic version of the war in which little Israel stands alone against the entire Arab world.( Shlaim: 36)

As the noted Palestinian thinker Ibrahim Abu-Lughod has written, Palestinians for a decade after 1948 adopted "a politics of accommodation" to the Arab and Israeli realities all around them. During the Nasser period, they were caught up in a general wave of anti-imperialist, Arab nationalist sentiment; hence in those years what Abu-Lughod calls "a politics of rejection". Then, after 1967, Palestinian nationalism asserted itself in the breach made by the Arabs' defeat, and this has been called the "politics of revolution and hope". On the cultural and intellectual level, the appearance of an organized Palestinian movement of resistance against the Israeli occupation began as a critique of traditional Arab nationalism whose ruins were strewn about the battlefields of 1967. Not only did Palestinian men and women take up arms on their own behalf for the first time, but they were part of a national experience that claimed primacy in modern Arab discourse by virtue of openness, honesty, realism; virtues that were alien to the Arab world.

New historicists concern themselves with "representations" and "subjects" Instead of the autonomous "self" or "individual," these critics speak of **subject positions** that are socially and linguistically constructed, created by various **discourses** of a given culture. In this sense, the subject- in works of art- becomes a representation, a model of human personality, an image of the human body and soul. "We must, in short, descend into detail, to grasp firmly ...the various sorts of individuals within each culture, if we wish to encounter humanity face to face." (Geertz: 53) In a similar vein, Yunis -as a subject upon whom different forces act- offers a number of useful presentations. Yunis is, in fact, a representation of Palestine and the Palestinian way of living. He participated in the "Holy Struggle alongside Abd El Qadir", in the Arab Commando Brigades and then in the Arab Nationalists Movement and in the Lebanon Regional Command of the Fatah Movement. Yunis, "the Wolf of Galilee, who knew the



country as no-one else did, had a story like no other. His story begins with that of Palestine. From the age of sixteen, Yunis started fighting the English and he remained a paradigm of a hero even though he eventually joined the PLO. Yunis' own life and disposition inevitably become a reflection of his people's story. Without a land of their own, Palestinians have clung to one overarching narrative: their epic history of dispossession and occupation. He was a representation of an epoch and, fortunately, he has remained unscathed by the stains of corruption and affluence that affected other Palestinian officials because, in essence, he was a "peasant" and a fedayeen fighter.

The image before the return of the PLO was the image of the freedom fighter, the image of the hero/victim who deserves sympathy and admiration. Now here is that same freedom fighter (chained with the conditions of his enemies), exercising his direct authority on the ordinary citizen, on the men, on the students and the shops and the traffic and the customs and excise and arts and letters ... Livings and jobs from cleaner to cabinet minister are in his gift. It is he who determines social standing and influence...He even arrests citizens sometimes, imprisons them and tortures them. (Barghouti: 60)

Samir El-Youssef writes:

Yunis is not only a father and husband but also a lover and freedom fighter—a symbol of a whole community trying to resist the division imposed on it. But the more we read about him, the more he emerges as someone who no longer fits the present. Like Don Quixote, Yunis is an epic hero in an age in which epic heroes are embarrassing, their deaths a relief to them and to those who have to tell their stories. In

Khaleel's telling, Yunis' death seems to mark the end of everything else. The novel begins by announcing that Umm Hassan, the only midwife in Shatila, has died; it ends with Khaleel standing over his hero's grave. (*Washington Post Book World* -March 5, 2006)

Yunis is, as said before, a symbol of Palestine. Even in his living death, lying comatose, motionless and unable to speak, he does represent a nation that has been, and is being, exhausted. However, I partly disagree with the claim that Yunis was an epic hero. Though Yunis is a moral character, and, needless to say, a hero, he is not given the full-fledged dimensions of unbeatable heroes. Khoury rejected the Palestinian tendency to shrine heroes whom are eventually made something other than human beings. Khaleel tells the sleeping Yunis: "when you laughed, it was like you were exploding from within yourself. Your laughter used to surprise me because I was convinced that heroes did not laugh. I used to look at the photos of the martyrs hanging on the walls in the camp, and they were not laughing. Their faces were frowning and closed, as though they held death prisoner within themselves. (19) Khaleel, then, communicates the unheroic spirit of his age. He says: "I have grown tired of saints and heroes and wolves. My father is a hero and you are a wolf, and I am lost in the middle. I see my father's death in yours and in your new-found childhood I see his. This thing I see is strange: I see you both, but I do not see myself, as though I am no longer there and everything around me is unreal, as though I have become a shadow of the life of two men I do not know." Khaleel's father and Yunis are both heroes but Khaleel is, on the other hand, is a representation of whole generations that were created by the occupation.

The occupation has created generations without a place whose colours, smells, and sounds they can remember; a first place that belongs to them, that they can return to in their memories in their cobbled- together exiles. There is no childhood bed

for them to remember, a bed on which they forgot a soft cloth doll, or whose white pillows - once the adults had gone out of an evening - were their weapons in a battle that had them shrieking with delight. This is it. The 'Occupation' has created generations of us that have to adore an unknown beloved: distant, difficult, surrounded by guards, by walls, by nuclear missiles, by sheer terror."  
(Barghouti: 62)

Every Palestinian today is in the unusual position of knowing that there was once a Palestine and yet seeing that place with a new name, people, and identity that deny Palestine altogether. However, Khaleel, as many others, did not even have a visual memory of the homeland. He never saw the sacred land in which his existence was denied. By desperately clinging to Yunis, Khaleel not only strives to recapture an image of his lost father but he is also searching for his own genesis, his "beginning", his individual history, his unseen Palestine. He makes himself up in Yunis and sees those he had seen and he did not. As Barghouti eloquently exclaims, "the displaced person becomes a stranger to his memories and so he tries to cling to them." However, these displaced, second generations are haunted with insecurities and incapacitation because they have had no tangible association with their homeland. As Khaleel confesses: "I do not want to be the captive of this mysterious village I have never seen... I am scared of sleeping and waking up to find myself in a strange land whose language I cannot speak. I am scared I will not wake up. I am scared I will not find my house or I will not find you." (322)

When asked about the novel, Khoury said: "I do not pretend that I can make a Palestinian history," he said. "All I wanted is to create a love story, because I think a tragedy like the Palestinian tragedy can only be dealt with through love." At the cave of Bab Al-Shams, love roots itself and magical encounters take place against all odds. The story of Yunis and Naheel is not less romantic than that of Romeo and Juliet or that of Qays and Laila for, despite the limits of time and

space, their love blossomed and grew. They find themselves living on opposite sides of a suddenly impassable border, he in Lebanon and she in Israel. Because Yunis is a fugitive from the Israeli authorities, the couple, thus, secretly meet in a cave that they have named Bab al-Shams; it is the country of love and passion.

It is interesting to note that this name alludes to Bilad al-Shams, the traditional name for Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine, long considered a single entity. This allusion puts emphasis on the notion that the cave is a metaphor for Palestine. As Yunis himself proclaims, he has 'founded a village in a place no-one knows, a village in the rocks where the sun enters and sleeps.'(18) The cave is "a house, and a village, and a country." "It is the only bit of Palestinian territory that has been liberated." In fact, it produced a "secret nation"; a family of seven children who have borne twenty five children by the end of the book. Bab al-Shams is where they made love and, thus, it is a place of love, sexuality and procreation. It is a place wherein the Palestinian love of life is best manifested seeing that sexual intercourse is often connoted with life and its continuity. Actually, making love is described in the novel as the "secret of life." (84)

New historicism is naturally interested in the concept of 'sexuality'. In fact, Foucault conceives the whole discourse of sexuality becoming prominent in a particular form as a result of power relations. Sexuality, he argues, only becomes a prominent discourse because relations of power had established it as a possible object; and conversely, if power was able to take it as a target, this was because techniques of knowledge and procedures of discourse were capable of investigating it." (Foucault: 98) The discourse of sexuality is, in most Arab countries, associated with negative and immoral connotations. However, in the Palestinian culture, sexuality becomes an expression of power; it is the power of nature and life that allies the Palestinian people against the death-machine that is sometimes called Israel.

Yunis was "like a lost man, talking without thinking, moving like a sleepwalker, unaware of [his] own existence except when he was on [his] way to Bab El Shams." It is the only "real" place in the novel because, located in Palestine, near the outskirts of Deir al-Asad, the

cave is a symbol of unconquered Palestine. It is a speckle of reality amidst a world of myths, unfinished stories and illusions. Yunis is an individual who can love and who can, therefore, return. Khaleel's relationship with Shams, on the other hand, may have been doomed because of its remoteness from the homeland. However, Shams and Naheeleh are both related to the sun of love and life.

Yunis' and Naheeleh's love story constitutes the oppositional discourse that new historicism is so often interested in. The novel is a story of men and women, of love that exists in a world that does not care, of a happiness that cannot be. Khaleel comments: "I didn't weep for Shams as I have wept for you and for this woman. I didn't weep for my father as I have wept for you and for her. I didn't weep for my mother as I have wept for you and for her. Before her death, Naheeleh told her children that they should shut and close the cave that, hitherto, they knew nothing of its existence. The cave, the secret place, the reinvention, the image of a lost Palestine, was forever closed so as not to be conquered.

## *Dying to Live*

"Because the world is the way it is, because whole groups of people can be maligned, neglected, ignored, for too many years, we need the voice of Elias Khoury—detailed, exquisite, humane—more than ever. Read him. Without fail, read him."

Naomi Shihab Nye

"A vast canvas of the Palestinian exodus ... Times, places, people, and massacres are interwoven. The tales crisscross as they are barely concluded in an anarchical delirium, a means for the author to sketch in the chaos of Palestinian history. But more than a struggle for remembrance, his novel is also an ode to those wives, mothers and sisters who nourish, rear, care for, and hope." Guardian Unlimited

**Yunis: "What was worthy dying for was what we wanted to live for."**

"Elias Khoury, along with Mahmoud Darwish, is an artist giving voice to rooted exiles and trapped refugees, to dissolving boundaries and changing identities, to radical demands and new languages. "

Edward Said

"They are our absence."  
Mourid Barghouti

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